

■ Douglas Waugh, MD

One purple martin can eat 2000 mosquitoes a day. This startling statistic is seen regularly every spring and summer at the top of an ad (in the mail order section of a well-known national newspaper) pushing ready-to-install martin houses.

Like most of us, I have a pretty high resistance to the advertising in daily newspapers. My reader-aversion index (RAI) is inversely proportional to the size of the ad, although I also find the content of some of them more aversive than others. Anything from a quarter page up triggers my page-turning reflex, particularly if it deals with oil, an Asian or Middle Eastern government, or a political action group. However, I am irresistibly drawn to smaller ads, particularly if they have pictures, and I usually can manage an extra minute or so for the little boxes that populate the mail order page.

These ads convey a cheery optimism. Most are overwhelmingly sincere, some are whimsically outrageous and others are intriguingly mysterious — like the martin house ad. Its opening statement challenges any consumer with a scientific background. How did they arrive at the figure 2000? Such a nice round number is too good to be true.

Wouldn't you be much more likely to read on if the ad said: "Ecologic studies (advertisers and consumers are irresistibly drawn to anything 'ecologic') show that.

at the peak of the breeding season, the average purple martin consumes 2081 mosquitoes every 24 hours." That's so much more reassuringly honest. But, whose studies? Whose breeding season, the martins' or the mosquitoes'? I know, they might both be the same, but then again, they might not. Or, the ad might be referring to the breeding season of some entirely different species. How can you be sure it isn't Patagonian piebald owls?

Then there's the business of someone actually *counting* those pesky mosquitoes. Sure, in these days of high unemployment you can hire students to do almost anything, but counting mosquitoes as they slip down the craw of purple martins? Even my gullibility is stretched trying to imagine some birdhouse peddler doing that, simply in the interest of truth in advertising.

Maybe he telephoned his friendly neighbourhood university's biology department asking: "Hey — can you guys gimme an idea how many mosquitoes a purple martin eats in a day?" (Biology departments are not fazed in the slightest by this kind of question; indeed, this would be among the saner ones they get in an average day.)

This struck me as a reasonable approach so I phoned a biologist friend. She told me that "we know from metabolic studies

that, in order to stay alive and healthy, an average adult bird would have to eat so many grams of insects each day. Now martins are not fussy about what kind of insect they eat, just so long as it's one that flies. But, *if* all those grams of insects consisted of nothing but mosquitoes, then it would take a couple of thousand of them to make up the required weight, give or take a few hundred. Of course, you would have to increase that by 20% for egg-laying females".

So all that ad really tells you is that *if* the martins who live in your birdhouse eat nothing but mosquitoes, which is pretty unlikely if you ask me, then they *might* each dispose of a couple of thousand per day. On the other hand, if you happen to be in the middle of the mayfly season, the mosquito body count would be much lower, maybe even zero.

If you are a starry-eyed optimist who wants to believe that *your* martins will eat only mosquitoes, and if each of the apartments in your 12-place martin condominium is occupied by a pair of birds, then your entire colony *could* eat nearly 50 000 mosquitoes every day. After the chicks arrive, well, the mind boggles.

If you are particularly gullible, you might go as far as to persuade yourself that they wouldn't leave a couple of dozen or so to feed on you and your family. I wouldn't count on that. After all, martins have *their* sense of ecologic responsibility too! ■

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